

Book Review: The Population of the UK

by blog admin

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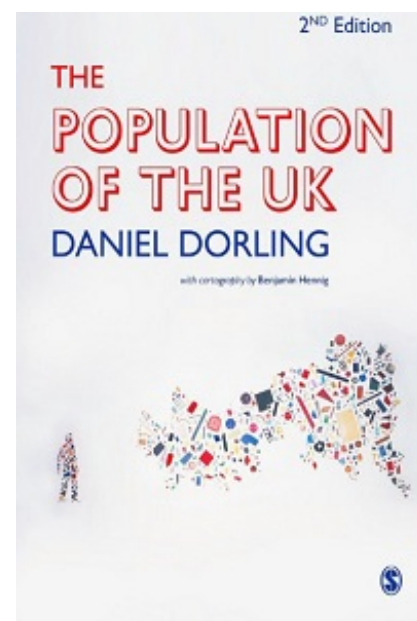
The Population of the UK explains the geographical differences in key socio-economic variables – like education, health, and work – that illustrate the UK's stark social inequalities and how these affect everyone's lives. **Ludi Simpson** thinks this book is commendably rich in quantitative evidence, although it has a subjective approach which emphasises human responsibility for maintaining or changing patterns of inequality.



The Population of the UK. Daniel Dorling. Sage. November 2012.

Find this book

Here is a tussle with social policy that will engage general readers, despite the exercises, key points and other aids characteristic of an undergraduate textbook. *The Population of the UK* is not a book of theory or methods, but an examination of spatial social patterns, that rails against inequality as much as it portrays it. In each chapter the reader is asked to consider maps and charts that show how people are socially sorted, with text that builds up a picture of unequal decisions and outcomes from cradle to grave. Our moves around the UK, as well as into and out of it, are shaped by our place and our jostling in this sorting, creating the human geography of Britain. This prolific author is a relatively young veteran of Newcastle, Bristol, Leeds, Sheffield and now Oxford Universities.



As one might expect from Danny Dorling's track record, the chapter on inequality draws many of the strands together. "Literacy, numeracy and mortality distributions all closely follow these same geographical patterns" of high incomes and of poverty. Through bank records that include unearned incomes as well as wages, he charts patterns of wealth, finding that only in Central London does extreme poverty and wealth coincide in the same area.



While many authors would see public education as a great leveller, this book claims that examinations function to sort people in ways that last for the rest of their lives. Already by age 11 the Key Stage 2 tests sort children into sets, and more than half do not reach the grade 4 labelled as 'doing well'. The examination system is organised to fail many and to pass some with flying colours that allow them to proceed to higher things, including higher incomes. Affluence is passed on from parent to child through educational support and through moving to areas with schools whose children are more likely to pass examinations. Nonetheless, the book provides a nuanced commentary, inviting us not only to recognise the stable geography of inequality that can be predicted from an early age, but also the deviations from it. Why does Merseyside West (and other mainly northern ex-industrial areas) do worse at GCSE than predicted at age 11, and why did children in Cornwall and coastal East Anglia do better? In this and sufficient other cases, the book does not provide answers, but leaves questions to consider.

Dorling demonstrates maps of teenage pregnancies that are the inverse of University entrants, and gives the education system in Britain a large responsibility for maintaining social sorting. “Current educational expectations and norms that are influencing so much else can be claimed to hold for many of the women who only have children later in life (or never at all). This is a group who are portrayed as having the most choices in life, but they often look, in aggregate, to have the least” (p. 27). For Dorling, social sorting determines the outcomes of the well-off just as much as the less well-off. Being ‘successful’ carries a lot of baggage too, and isn’t necessarily advantageous: “Poor education for the worst-off may breed complacency amongst the best-off. It is not hard to appear clever in countries where so many do so badly in education” (p. 95).

The lack of attention to academically popular debates may put off some seasoned academics. Where does the author stand on neighbourhood effects: is the persistent poverty of some places partly a result of their environment and aggregate social poverty, or simply the location of individuals who have been failed by the system? Perhaps it does not really matter to this book’s story; neighbourhood and individual effects are both consequences of systems that socially sort, resulting in the stark local inequalities described here. Systemic solutions involve social policies and moral aims that transcend the detail of their implementation through a balance of individual or neighbourhood investments.

Dorling asks his reader to consider how education would be different if it focused on teaching rather than sorting, with fewer graded examinations as he would clearly prefer. How does this affect the book itself? Each chapter has a conclusion, further reading, a key point summary. All its maps and charts are held as slides and data sheets at the book’s [website](#). The chapters’ exercises are mostly group activities. Some require a large space (not a room with fixed seats); others demand role play in small groups, interaction between students or the creation of social policies (such as non-examined education). There are certainly no prescriptions for individual markable scripts, though no doubt someone practised at these could invent them as extensions to the exercises.

This is a book demanding action in a number of ways. It is commendably rich in quantitative evidence, but the author claims that it is not purely objective: he sets out his interpretation of the data in the context of his own railing against inequalities. The evidence is a call to arms against inequality’s human origins. We can do better, he says: just look at the abstentions in voting patterns. We can do better: which social policies would you pursue as an MP (or next time you vote for one)? We can do better: how will you use geographical data to help change people’s minds?

The 2011 census results were being released as the book was being published. They provide plenty of scope for students to check out and update Dorling’s social patterns of the UK. This is a book that encourages by example a do-it-yourself approach to data analysis in human geography, emphasising the analyst’s own responsibility to display evidence clearly, to openly construct interpretations of data, and to focus on human responsibility for maintaining or changing those patterns.

Ludi Simpson’s demographic research has influenced understanding of race and migration and the use of demographic data in planning. He has been the president of the British Society of Population Studies for 2011-2013. [Read more reviews by Ludi](#).